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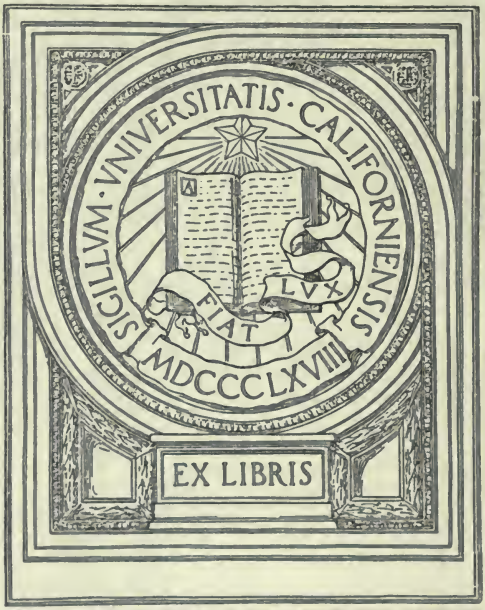

A Christmas Tale: in One Act: by Maurice Bouchor: Translated by Barrett H. Clark

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BARRETT H. CLARK

GENERAL EDITOR

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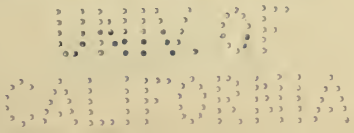

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MAURICE BOUCHOR.

Maurice Bouchor was born at Paris in 1855.

Bouchor is a dramatic poet of rare inspiration and tragic depth. His best-known long plays, "Tobie," "Noël," and "Les Mystères d'Eleusis," are, in the words of an eminent French critic, "among the most beautiful works of our time." "Conte de Noël"—"A Christmas Tale," here translated for the first time into English—is a charming little dramatic episode. It was first performed at the Comédie Française, in Paris, in 1895.

This play may be elaborately staged, but the detailed stage-directions need not be faithfully adhered to. The simplest of interiors and costumes may be used.

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A CHRISTMAS TALE

PERSONS REPRESENTED.

SAINT NICHOLAS
SAINT ROSE
PIERRE COEUR.....*A sculptor*
JACQUELINE.....*His wife*
ROSETTE.....*Their little girl, asleep in her cradle*

SCENE:—*A room in the home of* PIERRE COEUR, *Paris.*

TIME:—*The Fifteenth Century.*

A CHRISTMAS TALE

SCENE:—*A room of considerable size, serving at once as living-room and studio. Everything is simple, clean, and neat. To the right are wooden statues of various kinds, some painted in bright colors, but most of them unfinished. Strewn about the floor are pieces of wood, large blocks, and the like, together with chisels and other implements. The statues of* SAINT NICHOLAS *and* SAINT ROSE—*actors dressed to represent them—stand down-stage to the right, close to each other.* SAINT NICHOLAS *is an old man with a white beard, who wears the rich costume of a bishop;* SAINT ROSE, *little more than a child, with roses in her hair, is dressed like a saint of* FRA ANGELICO. *There is a door to the right, just behind these statues. To the left is a large fire-place, in which are dying embers; two children's shoes lie on the hearth-stone. Nearby is the cradle—hung with curtains—in which little* ROSE *is sleeping. At the center of the stage is a table, with a meal set on it, and a chair on either side. Through a bay-window at the back are seen the silhouette of the cathedral of Notre Dame and the roofs of houses covered with snow. It is night, and a few stars are out. On the mantel above the fire-place burns a candle; two other candles, half-burnt, are on the table. As the curtain rises,* JACQUELINE *is seated on a chair. She sits listening to a church bell which strikes five. Then she rises.*

JACQUELINE.—
'Tis five o'clock, and Pierre is still away.
I thought I heard his step—but 'twas not his!
My dear good husband, once so kind, neglects
And leaves me all alone. Is it his fault?
What most I fear is that his weakness will
Destroy him! Now no doubt he sits and drinks
In some low wine-shop: thus he spends his nights.
My Pierre! My genius! Lord in Heaven, hear!

(*She looks at* ROSETTE'S *shoes by the hearth.*)

I fear he'll bring no presents for Rosette——
Her Christmas will be sad without her toys.
He wanted so to buy some toy to make
Her little eyes grow wide with wonder. See,
The tiny shoes stand empty Christmas morn,
And seem to say: "Has Christmas passed us by?"

(*A pause.*)

He took his mantle with him, he was going
To Notre Dame for midnight Mass. How tenderly
He kissed me, when he told me, "Good night, dear!"
I thought he would be hungry, so I put
A goodly supper on the table, while the fire
Glowed bright, and through the windows I could see
The lights of Notre Dame, and hear the organ
And the choir. My heart was light with joy
At thought of his return, when we might talk
And I might influence and make him good:
I understand him and can soothe him well.
Now statues occupy him more than I.
For days and days his silence is unbearable——

(*She looks at the statues of* SAINT NICHOLAS *and* SAINT ROSE.)

Yet I am proud of these wood images——

My Pierre is no mere artisan or 'prentice;
He cuts a living face from living oak.
I must stand back and silently admire,
Stand mute with fear. His art is wife and child
For him. How sad I am that the lost hours
Spent at the inn cannot be mine! Oh, God!

(*She kneels before the statues.*)

Monsieur Saint Nicholas, Madame Saint Rose,
You whom my Pierre has graven, pardon me
If I dare speak to you—I suffer so!
You've always been so good, so kind to me!
Ah, Saints of Paradise, give back my Pierre.
Comfort, console me, if you value him!

(*She rises.*)

He's not yet home. I am so tired out!

(*She goes to* ROSETTE'S *cradle and looks at the sleeping child.*)

She sleeps a sound soft sleep. Oh, may God grant
That I be spared you, little one, my sweet!

(*She turns toward* SAINT ROSE.)

I give her to your keeping while I rest,
To you, her patron saint.

(*She looks again at* ROSETTE.)

I dare not kiss her,
She must sleep on in peace.—Now will I lay
A pillow for her.

(*She carefully arranges the pillow in the cradle.*)

Sleep in peace, my dear!

(*A pause.*)

Shall I? Dare I? Yes, I must.

(*She kisses* ROSETTE.)

There, my child.

(*She sits in a chair at some distance from the cradle, closes her eyes, and is soon fast asleep. A moment later she speaks as in a dream.*)

I see her now the day she was baptized,
I have not smiled so much since that glad time.
My Pierre forgets me, spends his nights away
In drinking——

(*A rather long pause.*)

Dear Saint Nicholas, I pray,
Oh, give me rest—make me forget awhile——

(*The Statue of* SAINT NICHOLAS *moves. A bright light floods the room.* SAINT NICHOLAS *comes slowly toward* JACQUELINE, *and extends a hand to her.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Poor creature!
JACQUELINE.—
What, was I asleep? Protect me!

(*She falls asleep again.* SAINT NICHOLAS *looks at her, smiling benignantly, then turns to the statue of* SAINT ROSE.)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Rose, Rose! No answer from her! Rose, I'm speaking!

You hear me? Come to life!

(*He examines the statue, which remains inanimate.*)

'Tis surely she!

(*He turns round facing the audience, while the statue of* SAINT ROSE *begins to move. She quietly walks toward* SAINT NICHOLAS *and listens to him.*)

From Heaven have we come to save Jacques Coeur.
He 'graved my image for the joy it gave him,
No gain was his—and yet he leaves his wife!
I hope that we can save him——

SAINT ROSE.—

Nicholas?

SAINT NICHOLAS.—

Ah, Rose! You're late.

SAINT ROSE.—

Because I've been to see
The children who have never been baptized
And giv'n them Christmas cakes, and flow'rs and kisses.

SAINT NICHOLAS.—

But the angels all do that, my dear Saint Rose,
And one of them stands guard before the gate.

SAINT ROSE.—

And pray what difference does that make to me?

SAINT NICHOLAS.—

But know you not it is forbidden?

SAINT ROSE.—

Yes——
But then I know another door.

SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*Alarmed*)

Ah, Rose!

SAINT ROSE.—

It's time, I say, these poor young souls below
Breathed Heaven's air and played with angels——

SAINT NICHOLAS.—

Ah,
You're daring, little Rose, you should be sent
To play with dolls. The Lord forbids——
SAINT ROSE.—
The Lord
Is not so strict as you would have me think.
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
I'll say no more, then. Tell me, now, where are
The toys you should have brought—Where are they,
Rose?
SAINT ROSE.—
I've given them already, to the poor!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
But here——
SAINT ROSE.—
I pray you, be not angry with me.
I'll go at once to Heaven and bring more.

(*She goes out.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
By all the twelve Apostles, I declare
She treats me like a grandpapa—Ah, well!

(*He catches sight of the table.*)

Now what is this? A supper? Were I not
Well nourished on the manna of the angels
I should be hungry—aye, and thirsty too——
God bless this meal.
JACQUELINE.—(*Half-asleep*)
Is that you, Pierre? Not yet——
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Her heart is weary—sleep again, my child,
I watch and will give comfort to your soul.
I heard your prayer ere it left your lips,
And Rose smiled through her tears. For you
We've come to life. Sleep now, for greater joy
Is soon to come to you.

(JACQUELINE *sighs and then falls into a peaceful sleep. Enter* SAINT ROSE, *loaded down with toys.*)

SAINT ROSE.—
Just see these toys!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*Looking at the toys*)
How Rosette's heart will beat!

(SAINT ROSE *kneels before the hearth and lays the toys about her. She speaks the following lines as she arranges the toys.*)

SAINT ROSE.—
Just see this green one!
You'll have to go in this shoe—Now, the other——
Here's Saint Cecilia playing on her organ,
And here three angels.—Saint Médard, come here.
And next to old Saint Anthony, a pig.
And now this little cake, an angel made it
With his Heav'n-bright hands; celestial roses
Are wreath'd upon it—leave it in the box!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
That's all, I think?
SAINT ROSE.—(*Rising*)
They're pretty, are they not?
Those little people all arranged so proudly?
(*Going to* ROSETTE'S *cradle.*)
I'll look at her——

(*She opens the curtains of the cradle.*)

How sweetly does she sleep!
I wonder if I looked that way at three?
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Ah, Rose, what vanity!
SAINT ROSE.—
That's true.—Enough!

(*She pulls the curtains to.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Our presents will bring joy to them, I know.
SAINT ROSE.—(*Listening*)
I thought I heard——?
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
What, Rose?
SAINT ROSE.—
The father coming!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Yes, I hear him too——

(SAINT NICHOLAS *and* SAINT ROSE *resume their statuesque attitude, standing in front of the hearth, hiding the toys. The bright light dies out. Enter* PIERRE. *He has evidently been drinking.*)

PIERRE.—
It's me—Ho, Jacqueline—it's not my fault!
I didn't really want to stay, but friends——
How late is it?

(*Without waiting for an answer, and not seeing* JACQUELINE *as she lies asleep, he falls heavily into a chair.*)

Ah, Saints of Heaven, help!
I have not drunk so much since Trinity!

(*He sees* JACQUELINE.)

You're not in bed yet?

(*He rises and goes to her.*)

Sleeping? Poor Jacqueline!
After the Mass in Notre Dame I said:
"Go home—don't see your friends—you'll drink too much——

You know that Jacqueline, your wife, will weep.
Not home on Christmas Eve would be too bad."
And yet I went to the inn——

(*A pause.*)

Good Lord, what then?
The rascals were amusing, and that Gringoire,
The clever chap, a poet too, was there;
I could not get away.—Now to my saints——
I rather like Saint Nick, and Rose too, she——

(*He raises his head and to his surprise finds that the statues are not in their accustomed position.*)

They stood there when I left—I said Good-night
The last thing to them——

(*He looks around the room.*)

I'm bewitched, I know!

(*Clasping his hands in terror.*)

Dear Saints of Heaven, show yourselves, I pray!

(*He now sees the statues.*)

Ah, now I see you, statues of my love,
My masterpieces——

(*Noticing their changed position.*)

Why, you've moved, I see!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
'Tis time to speak.

(*The light re-appears.*)

PIERRE.—
Dear Lord, how light it is!
The moonlight floods the room from end to end!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Pierre Coeur!
PIERRE.—(*Trembling*)
Who spoke my name?
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
I.
PIERRE.—(*Terrified*)
What, my statue?

(*Putting his hand to his forehead and speaking to himself.*)

And yet my eyes are open—who mocks me?
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
I am Saint Nicholas himself, Pierre Coeur.
PIERRE.—
You are——?!

(*Falling to his knees.*)

Forgive me, oh forgive me, holy Saint!

(*He hides his face in his hands.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Are you not filled with shame, Pierre Coeur, to spend
Your nights in drinking, while your poor wife sits
And counts the hours by herself, alone?
You kill your body and your soul with men
Who fear nor God nor devil—you, a genius!
God made of you an artist and you seek
To kill the gift that is not yours to kill.
PIERRE.—
Oh, pardon me!

SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Then Jacqueline, your wife,
Your child Rosette, you have forgot them.
PIERRE.—
I?
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
You've passed the night amid the fumes of wine,
But did you bring your child a single toy?
PIERRE.—(*In despair*)
I did not!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
When she wakes up in the morning
And looks for toys and presents, she will find
Nothing at all—not even one poor orange!
What will you tell her? That the Christ-child failed
To come here, busied as he was with others' toys?
PIERRE.—
Oh, pity me!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*Gently*)
Does that thought make you sober?——
Come here, we have for you a sweet surprise.

(PIERRE *rises.*)

If you will promise on your honor, Pierre,
Never to drink as you have drunk to-night,
I will repair your fault this instant. Come,
I see you are repentant, tell me, now?
PIERRE.—(*Solemnly*)
I promise never to touch wine again!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*Good-naturedly*)
So much I would not ask of you.
You may drink, but in moderation, that
Is good and cheery, but with Jacqueline
You must remain at home and drink.
PIERRE.—
I will.
SAINT ROSE.—
I know he will.

PIERRE.—
I've sinned; my heart is torn.
SAINT ROSE.—
No sadness now, or I shall leave. Now see.

(*She shows him the toys.*)

PIERRE.—
What's this?

(*He goes to the fire-place, kneels and examines the toys, which he admires.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*To* JACQUELINE, *who is still asleep*)
Saint Rose and I, while you were sleeping,
Have taken care of you and yours. Awake,
Dear Jacqueline, and let your heart be free.

(JACQUELINE *opens her eyes, and rises.*)

JACQUELINE.—
Oh, dear Saint Nicholas, you have kept watch!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Saint Rose and I.
SAINT ROSE.—(*Pointing to* PIERRE)
Look, Jacqueline, he is happy!

(JACQUELINE *sees* PIERRE, *absorbed in examining the toys.*)

JACQUELINE.—
To you I owe this happiness, Saint Rose.
SAINT ROSE.—
I looked at dear Rosette; that's my reward.
PIERRE.—(*To himself*)
The angel who carved this knows well his trade.
SAINT ROSE.—(*To* JACQUELINE)
Now speak to him.

PIERRE. (*To himself*)
I should be proud myself——
JACQUELINE.—
You're home at last, Pierre?

(PIERRE *rises quickly, turns, sees his wife, then looks at the floor, ashamed.*)

PIERRE.—
Yes, I just came in.
JACQUELINE.—(*Pointing to the toys*)
But where did you find all these toys, my dear?

(PIERRE *is embarrassed and does not answer.*)

SAINT ROSE.—
Poor Pierre, he's blushing!
PIERRE.—
Dear, I am ashamed.
I have neglected you, while day by day
You sat in silent sadness, saying nothing;
At night you waited for me while I drank too deep.
When I came home you did not say a word,
Not one reproach. I should fall to my knees
And ask forgiveness. Dear dear wife, how cruel
I was, and what I've made you suffer, dear——
SAINT ROSE.—
One kiss means more to her than pardons asked.
JACQUELINE.—
The past have I forgotten; now I'm happy.
PIERRE.—
You do forgive me, then? You pardon me?
JACQUELINE.—(*Smiling*)
Oh, yes!
PIERRE.—
And will forget all else?
JACQUELINE.—
I will.
Pierre, doubt it not.

PIERRE.—
My life from now on will
Be spent in loving you.

(*He kisses* JACQUELINE'S *hands.*)

SAINT NICHOLAS.—(*To* SAINT ROSE)
Come Rose, they're tired;
See, daylight's coming, and they must have rest.
SAINT ROSE.—(*Looking at* PIERRE)
See, Nicholas, he's crying!
SAINT NICHOLAS.—
Yes, in Heaven
There is rejoicing; love and hope have come
Once more. The Christ is born and Mary sits
Smiling at Him. Let peace be upon earth!

(*Sounds of a choir are heard. After a few moments,* SAINT NICHOLAS *looks smilingly at* SAINT ROSE.)

We must return, Rose, to our places there.

(*They stand as statues where they stood at first.*)

God bless this place! Farewell, and rest in peace!

(*The light dies out and the music stops. The statues are immobile. Gradually the daylight creeps in at the window.* PIERRE *and* JACQUELINE *awake. They look about in astonishment, then look at the statues.*)

PIERRE.—
They stand there as before. They have not moved!

(PIERRE *and* JACQUELINE *go to the statues, and kneel before them.*)

JACQUELINE.—
Dear saints, you've wiped away my tears.
PIERRE.—
You have brought joy to this our humble home.
JACQUELINE.—(*To* PIERRE)
You'll keep your promise?
PIERRE.—
Yes, dear, it is sacred!
JACQUELINE.—
I'll think no more about it.
PIERRE.—
I could not
Offend my friends the saints.
JACQUELINE.—
See what I have for you.

(*She shows him the supper on the table.*)

PIERRE.—
The table set?
JACQUELINE.—
It's simple, dear, but good,
It's your reward.
PIERRE.—(*Touched*)
My dearest Jacqueline!
JACQUELINE.—
You are not hungry, Pierre? Come, tell me, are you?
PIERRE.—
This meal is blessed by Heaven; I shall eat.
But first, a kiss——

(*He kisses her.*)

JACQUELINE.—(*Pointing to* ROSETTE's *cradle*)
We must speak softly, now!

(*She takes a step toward the cradle, but* PIERRE *detains her.*)

PIERRE.—
She sleeps as softly as a bird at night.
JACQUELINE.—
Then let us eat at once, I want to be
With our Rosette when first she wakens up;
Her joy must be ours too.
PIERRE.—
It will. Sit down,
And later, rest.
JACQUELINE.—
We must not miss High Mass.
PIERRE.—(*As they sit down at the table*)
No, we shall go together, and thank God
For this our happiness.

(*The red of the rising sun has touched the towers of Notre Dame, which are seen through the window at the back.*)

CURTAIN.

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BARRETT H. CLARK

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